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Beyond Remittances: Knowledge Transfer among Highly Educated Latvian Youth Abroad

Russell King,* Aija Lulle and Laura Buzinska

ABSTRACT

Young, tertiary-educated emigrants see themselves, and are seen by their home country's government, as agents of economic and social change, especially if they can be incentivized to return home. In this paper we examine whether this hypothesized positive impact is realized, taking the case of Latvia, a small peripheral country in north-east Europe, formerly part of the Soviet Union but since 2004 a member-state of the European Union. We build our analysis on data from an online questionnaire (n=307) and from narrative interviews (n=30) with foreign-educated Latvian students and graduates. In moving beyond remittances, which are the main element in the theory and policy of migration's contribution to development, we examine knowledge transfer as a form of "social remittance", breaking down knowledge into a range of types – embrained, embodied, encultured etc. We find that students and graduates do indeed see themselves as agents of change in their home country, but that the changes they want to make, and the broader imaginaries of development that they may have, are constrained due to the limited scale of the market and the often non-transparent recruitment practices in Latvia. Policy should recognize and respond to various barriers that exist to knowledge transfer and return.

Keywords: social remittances, knowledge transfer, migration and development, highly educated migrants, Latvia

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Introduction

For a small, peripheral European country like Latvia, young, highly educated migrants are potential agents of economic and social change in their home country. Their contribution to change and development is conventionally thought of as taking place via three mechanisms – the “two Rs” of remittances and return, plus other contributions from the diaspora in terms of investment and the channeling of new ideas. This is how most scholars operationalize the link between migration and home-country development in what has come to be known as the migration–development nexus (for a selection of relevant literature see de Haas 2010; Faist et al. 2011; Lucas 2005; Van Hear and Sørensen 2003).

Within the migration–development nexus, remittances have taken center-stage, consistent with the neoliberal philosophy of individual initiative and the concomitant retreat from state planning. Defined as “current private transfers from migrant workers who are considered residents of the host country to residents in the workers’ country of origin” (World Bank 2011: xvi), remittances are usually conceived of as financial flows transmitted via banks or money transfer operators such as Western Union or conveyed cash-in-hand by migrants on return visits to their family members. Rather than overseas aid packages, foreign investment or state-managed development plans, remittances are thought to be a more effective means of “bottom-up” development, directing resources to those who are most needy and deserving. Remittances are a central plank of the so-called “new economics of migration”, wherein they are constructed as an effective route out of poverty, enabling both their beneficiaries’ survival from periodic hunger and disaster, and providing a means for investment for a more prosperous future (Black 2009; Lucas 2005: 145–206; Taylor 1999).

Financial remittances are not, however, our main focus in this paper. Our first step in moving “beyond remittances” is to revisit Peggy Levitt’s important concept of *social remittances*, defined by her as “the ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital that flow from [migrant] receiving- to sending-country communities” (1998: 927). Despite the seminal status of Levitt’s 1998 paper, reinforced by recent refinements (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011, 2013), there have been rather few empirical studies of how this important concept plays out in practice. Precisely how do migrants and returnees imagine and effect social and economic change in their home countries? What are the barriers, both perceived and objective, which they have to overcome in order to achieve their aspired role as development agents?

In this paper we are particularly interested in *knowledge transfer* (Williams 2007a) from tertiary-educated migrants, specifically from Latvian graduates who have undertaken some or all of their higher education abroad. Our guiding research questions are the following. How do young, tertiary-educated migrants imagine and practice knowledge transfer across international borders which correspond to economic, social and cultural boundaries? What are their diagnoses of Latvia’s development needs and opportunities, and how do they envision their own contribution, both in terms of their ego-centered career development and their more altruistic concern for their country’s future?

Our paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we provide some further context to the case-study of Latvia. We put forward the notion of an evolving Latvian student and graduate diaspora, we comment on the country’s recent political history and its peripherality within the European Union, and we summarize recent migration trends. The succeeding section is conceptual: here we describe the main theoretical notions associated

with knowledge transfer as part of social remittances, including distinctions between different categories of knowledge (*embrained, embodied, encultured* etc.), as well as the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* as a pragmatic response to local values and dynamic complexity. A section on data and methods then follows. Two surveys underpin our empirical analysis: an online questionnaire survey of Latvian graduates who have studied abroad (N=307), and a series of in-depth interviews (N=30) to the same category of research participants. Drawing on findings of this dual research design, empirical results are presented under three headings: imaginaries of development; return and knowledge transfer; and the social, cultural and ethnic boundaries that have to be confronted and, ideally, traversed. In the conclusion we return to the original research questions, evaluate the extent to which they have been answered, and draw out the wider lessons of our Latvian case-study.

Latvian students and graduates abroad: a resource for development?

Like the other so-called “A8” countries which joined the European Union in its major eastern enlargement in 2004 (Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia), Latvia has experienced significant emigration of young people in the last decade and more. According to the most recent census (CSB 2015), more than 220,000 people emigrated from Latvia during 2001–2011, a significant share of the total population of 2 million. Three events in the country’s recent political history have shaped the evolution of this migration: the fall of the Iron Curtain and Latvia’s subsequent independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, its accession to the EU in 2004, and the 2008 economic crisis. The most important of these events was EU accession, which opened up a new migratory space into which Latvians were free to move, although they were only free also to work initially in the UK, Ireland and Sweden. The subsequent years were a period of large-scale emigration and also return, accompanied by healthy inflows of remittances which boosted GDP per capita and the country’s overall financial balance. The post-accession boom years were, however, abruptly halted by the global and European economic crisis which hit Latvia severely when its banks failed and the government had to seek financial support from the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission. It is true that there has been a strong recovery of the Latvian economy since 2010, but some attribute this to the combination of austerity and emigration, rather than reflecting true, output-driven growth (Sommers and Woolfson 2014).

From the perspective of the UK and Ireland, the two main destinations for recent Latvian migration, the main image is of low-skilled workers doing essential but often casual and low-paid jobs in agriculture and food processing, on construction sites, in hotels and catering, and in domestic cleaning. However, a growing number of migrants are university graduates, as well as emigrating students who move abroad to compete their education. Whilst the ethos of free movement within the EU is one of the Community’s foundational canons which can hardly be challenged, there are concerns in Latvia about the loss of such a significant share of the key developmental resource of human capital, especially at a time when Latvia is experiencing absolute demographic decline – the population was 2.3 million in 2001, falling to 2.0 million in 2011. Students, too, are a diminishing national total, dropping from around 130,000 students in universities and other third-level institutions in the boom years of 2004–2008 to 86,000 in 2014 (MoES 2015: 31). This sharp decrease in the number of students enrolled in Latvia should be seen in the light of three factors: the very

low birth rate, continuing emigration, and the effect of the crisis which makes it more difficult for students and their families to fund their studies.

The growth in the number of Latvian students getting their qualifications abroad mirrors global and European trends in international student migration. This form of migration grows at a quicker pace than the growth of total global migration, and this is reflected in the appearance of several major studies on the international mobility of students (see Alberts and Hazen 2013; Bilicen 2014; Brooks and Waters 2011; Byram and Dervin 2008; Gérard and Uebelmesser 2014). According to the International Institute for Education (IIE 2015), international student numbers rose from 2.1 million in 2001 to 4.5 million in 2014. The main drivers of this increase have been the prestige and career-relevance of a qualification from a more “advanced” university system; increasingly open, integrated and compatible educational systems for foreign students, enabling easier mobility; competition amongst national university systems and individual institutions for the “best and brightest” students from around the world; and the general rise in global interconnectedness economically, socially and culturally (Findlay 2011).

The common interpretation of international student migration – apart from being a global multi-billion dollar industry – is that it is a “win” situation for students who are able to expand both their academic knowledge and their cultural horizons which may, in turn, increase their opportunities for better careers. The question then arises as to the *location* of their subsequent careers: abroad or back in the country of origin? Surprisingly little is known about the career outcomes of foreign-educated graduates who return to their home countries, particularly within the European context. Evidence may, indeed, be contradictory. A study by Di Pietro (2013) on Italian graduates found that studying abroad increased the possibility of being in employment three years after graduation. Conti and King (2015), on the other hand, found that Italian graduates who had either studied and/or worked abroad were fearful of returning to Italy because of the high likelihood of unemployment and their loss of the networks and personal contacts thought necessary to get a graduate-level job.

Given the developmental potential of foreign-educated graduates, what Michael Collyer (2013) calls “emigration states” have responded by paying more attention to their “extra-territorial” populations. In addition to the “two Rs” mentioned earlier (remittances and return), the third prong of the migration–development nexus – “mobilizing the diaspora” – becomes a key focus for policy, especially when the “diaspora” contains a high proportion of highly educated and therefore potentially creative and wealthy individuals. It is also interesting to note, in passing, how states increasingly deploy the term “diaspora” to denote their emigrant populations, even those who, like students, are recently emigrated and who therefore do not fulfil the prototypical definition of a diaspora as a long-standing, multi-generation and rather settled population (cf. Cohen 2008: 2–4). Whilst some would say the phrase “student diaspora” is an oxymoron because students are likely to be recently departed, onwardly mobile and lacking a true diasporic identity, the flexible use of the word diaspora chimes with its modern-day extended meaning whereby it is used more as a metaphor rather than as a specific historical-geographical formation (Brubaker 2005).

Latvia is one of several Central and Eastern European countries which are anxious to attract back young and highly educated migrants, and which are concerned about the scale of the brain drain in a context of future economic planning with a shrinking supply of qualified graduates. The main policy document produced by the Latvian government is its Return Migration Support Plan for 2013–2016 (Ministry of Economics 2013), which proposed eight strands of policy and support for returning migrants:

- improving the quality of relevant information in state institutions and streamlining the bureaucratic side
- improving communication about job vacancies in Latvia
- priority for attracting back the highly skilled
- teaching Latvian language to the children of migrants
- supporting the children's reintegration into Latvian schools when they return with their parents
- expansion of ties between the government and the diaspora
- state companies cannot ask for Russian language as a prerequisite for job hiring
- broaden the categories of those who can apply for repatriation support

A ninth strand was added later:

- better recognition of foreign diplomas.

Alongside the policy plan were key statements by government officials. Daniels Pavluts, Minister of Economics at the time, put it like this in a 2012 statement:

We want to give a clear message to Latvian nationals around the world that their future is in Latvia. We have to develop a return migration plan with clearly defined activities, funding for such activities, and a timetable.¹

The minister announced that his "dream is that half of all emigrants would return," but this target was then adjusted to 100,000 in 20 years.

At first sight, the timing of the plan was opportune, coming when the economic recovery from the crisis was well under way. And there was a democratic ring to the policy process which was open to any citizen to submit suggestions. But, inevitably, the policy was harshly criticized for its elitist and ethno-centric nature – note its pro-Latvian, anti-Russian references, and its priority for the highly skilled. Moreover, the targets were unrealistic, and less than a year after the launch of the plan the government changed the rhetoric to a more individualistic, neoliberal emphasis, as Pavluts subsequently argued in a 2013 interview:

The aim for the plan was never to persuade anybody to come back; not in a direct way, at least. That would be criminal... to ask people to come back if there are no real grounds for that. The plan was oriented towards people who had already made their decision to return; who know what they will do upon return and how they will make their living. The aim of the plan was to put pressure on the government institutions to collaborate and provide the necessary educational, social and employment services for those who do return.²

One of the few concrete activities which have been implemented to promote return of the highly skilled is an internship programme for graduates to work in Latvian government departments and institutions. The programme received 143 applications from 20 countries, and so far six people have been selected to work in Latvia in summer 2015.

Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis also put his weight behind the general policy of mobilizing the Latvian diaspora, portraying emigrant professionals as a resource which

should be tapped into to help the country to flourish, especially from an entrepreneurial perspective. Addressing the World Latvians Economics and Innovation Forum in 2015, he said:

Your location abroad should be seen as an opportunity for development which allows Latvian entrepreneurs to use your experience and knowledge, opening up a better cooperation with Latvia... Perhaps a good part of those of you who are here, are the first representatives of Latvian entrepreneurs in your countries of residence... Nobody can know the market and its opportunities better than you. In the meantime, you understand Latvian traditions and the business environment in Latvia. But you can also see Latvia from outside and therefore you can sometimes detect needs and problems even more clearly, and what is needed for the economic development of our country. Therefore I ask you to build ties and collaboration with Latvia-based entrepreneurs which will give an impetus to them to develop as important players in the world.³

This appeal to patriotic feelings also represented an elitist selection, this time targeting only entrepreneurs. Latvia's selective diaspora mobilization strategy reflects broader concerns about the way such policies, if uncritically celebrated, can perpetuate or even exacerbate inequalities – as has been demonstrated in other geographic contexts (Larner 2015; Smith and Gergan 2015). And rather than patriotic fervour, survey data display a starkly different picture amongst the broader Latvian emigrant population. An internet survey of 14,000 Latvian emigrants worldwide carried out by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia in 2015 revealed that trust in the government was “catastrophically low” (IPS 2015). On a scale 0–10 (most negative to most positive), the average assessment of the Latvian government was 1.5, with 56% of respondents awarding the lowest rating of 0. By comparison, the respondents' assessments of the government of the countries where they were residing was 5.9.

No quantitative research exists on return trends of Latvian students and graduates from abroad. We do know that from *all* emigrants who left during 2001–2008, some 40% returned (Hazans 2011). But of course some, possibly many, could have re-emigrated – as many Polish returnees from Britain did when they found that conditions were still tough in Poland (White 2014). In Kahanec and Fabor's (2013) study on the migration of young people from the new (i.e. post-2004) EU states, one of the key findings was that younger migrants tend to stay for a shorter time abroad, and this holds for Latvia too. In the rest of this paper we will therefore treat Latvia as a rather typical example of knowledge transfer and return migration, not only for other Central and East European countries but also in other global contexts where countries have, relative to their size, large cohorts of young and highly educated people living abroad.

Data

Our target population for this study was composed of Latvian university students and graduates who had completed (or were still undergoing) all or part of their tertiary-level studies abroad. The sample included both those who were still studying or working abroad, and those who had returned to Latvia. This target-population definition was kept deliberately broad in order to capture the variety of experiences of highly educated Latvians

studying and working abroad and back home across a range of life-stages and age ranges from 18 to 35 years old.

Rather than follow conventional definitions of “international students” as those who have crossed an international border for the purpose of study following prior education in another country, or of “foreign students” as defined on the basis of citizenship, we adopted a more flexible definition based on the notion of diaspora. We approach Latvian students and recent graduates who live abroad as a form of highly educated diasporic youth. At different ends of this flexible spectrum we find the Latvian graduate who goes abroad in his or her mid-20s to research a PhD, and the child of Latvian labor migrants who is taken abroad by her/his migrating parents at a young age and then pursues third-level studies abroad.

To some purists, this use of the term “diaspora” violates its classic meaning of a historically embedded ethnic population scattering characterized by trauma, loss, exile, and desire for return to a common ancestral homeland (Cohen 2008: 1–19). Rather, we follow Brubaker’s conceptualization of diaspora as a “community of practice” (2005: 12), including the notion of a “young” diaspora or a “diaspora-in-the-making” (cf. Mai 2005). Or, to be more categorical, we quote Esman (2009: 14) who, wishing to transcend the classical concept heavily influenced by the Jewish case, defines diaspora as “a migrant community that maintains material and sentimental linkages with its home country, while adapting to the environment and institutions of the host country”.

The primary data examined in this paper come from two sources. The first is an internet-based questionnaire survey carried out in February–March 2015 and distributed via the webpage of the Centre for Diaspora and Migration Studies of the University of Latvia. Here we analyze written responses to three open questions which were formulated as follows:

1. What are your plans for the future?
2. I want to use my knowledge....
3. I want to emphasize....

The idea was that, outside of the simple quantitative and factual data collected by the questionnaire, respondents (who numbered 307) would have space to express their plans, thoughts and ideas freely. This approach yielded abundant and highly reflective and opinionated responses. Respondents provided recommendations about Latvia’s future development and engaged in a dialogue concerning their personal experiences and views of both abroad and, more particularly, their home country and its development needs.

Altogether the respondents represented 26 countries as their current place of residence. The largest group were those who had already returned to Latvia (63). Of the remainder, 55 responded from the UK, 26 from Sweden, 24 from the Netherlands, 23 from Denmark, 17 from Germany, 13 from Finland, 12 from the US, and smaller numbers from several other countries.

The survey respondents were disproportionately made up of women (75%) – at first sight, a rather marked deviation from the gender balance that we ideally sought. But actually, there is a female majority amongst graduating students both in the EU as a whole (60% in 2012; Eurostat 2015) and in Latvia (65% in 2014; MoES 2015: 33); so the bias is less serious. In terms of age distribution, 70% of respondents were aged 18–29, the remainder over 30 years of age.

The second source of primary data consists of 30 semi-structured interviews with Latvian students and graduates who were studying, or had studied, abroad. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via skype, and lasted one hour on average. They were carried out in the interviewee's language of choice – Latvian, Russian or English – and were tape-recorded subject to informed consent. The interview phase of the research immediately followed the online questionnaire, and took place between March and July 2015. Interviewees were partly recruited from the database of surveyed respondents from the questionnaire (who were asked to indicate their willingness to be available for in-depth interview), and additional interviewees were reached by a snowballing method. For the latter, no more than two contacts given by one interviewee were used in order to ensure access to different social networks.

Compared to the online survey, the interview sample was more gender-balanced: 16 females and 14 males. Included in the interview survey were students and graduates at bachelor, Master's and PhD level, in order to trace different levels of embrained knowledge and different educational life transitions. We excluded, however, those who had been abroad only as exchange students, since this form of student mobility does not result in a final degree qualification from abroad.

The interviews were designed to elicit qualitative biographical data from the participants, who were encouraged to "tell their stories" in a roughly chronological sequence across three life-stages: their background, upbringing and early education in Latvia; their experiences of study and (if relevant) work abroad; and their experiences since return to Latvia (or for those still abroad, their attitudes towards and plans for return). A key purpose of the interview was to elicit their own diagnosis of the problems and potentialities of development in Latvia, and how they envisioned their possible contribution to the development process. Obviously we did not, in the interview dialogues, use terms like "social remittances" or "embrained" and "enculturated" knowledge; but we found that interviewees' narratives, based both on their experiences and their opinions, could be easily framed within this conceptual terminology.

According to our preferred theoretical optic, we distinguished which type of knowledge our respondents were giving meaning to. We also identified different types of boundary (economic, social and cultural) that had to be crossed in order for the knowledge transfer to take place. These boundary categories will structure some of our empirical analysis below. First we examine the more general and often idealized imaginations that respondents and interviewees articulated when talking about "development" in Latvia and their own actual and imagined return to the homeland.

In what follows, any names are pseudonyms. Data from the online survey (S) and the interviews (I) are indicated thus, together with gender (F or M) and the country/ies of current and past residence as a student or worker.

Imaginarities of development: from idealized returns to disillusionment

Survey respondents and interviewees often expressed idealized imaginaries of their return and the knowledge contribution that they envisaged themselves making to the home country. In doing so they articulated, either explicitly or implicitly, a particular "model" for Latvia's development; and they usually saw themselves as agents of a positive impact of migration – both on their own personal development and the development of their homeland. But this framework reveals that development is not purely an economic process

but is also socially and culturally inscribed. In a paper in an earlier issue of this journal, Thornton et al. (2015: 69) stated that “developmental idealism is a cultural model – a set of beliefs and values – that identifies the appropriate goals of development and the ends for achieving these goals”. In post-socialist Latvia these “beliefs, values and goals” are no longer socialist but neoliberal. As we shall see in this section, whilst the research participants were able to identify the goals and means for Latvia’s development, they were not always “allowed” to achieve these ambitions, partly because of what they perceived as their externally ascribed identity as “returnees” and as “foreign-educated”.

The first set of quotes below illustrates the optimistic, positive cause–effect impact imagined by the participants, and the necessity for the Latvian government to “know its diaspora” (Dzenovska 2015).

I would like to emphasize that these kinds of efforts [for the state to communicate with the student diaspora] should be welcomed, because knowledge gained from outside can be very effectively integrated into the labor market in Latvia, bringing in new ideas and, probably, giving benefits to business in Latvia (S, F, UK).

Other respondents idealistically emphasized how the Latvian state should “use” them as valuable developmental resources, not so much for investment purposes but more in the field of knowledge transfer. Latvian students abroad could be asked “to take part in voluntary research work, or giving guest-lectures, and other forms of collaboration with partner organizations in Latvia” (S, F, Sweden). In the words of another student:

It is important for the Latvian government to know its people who study abroad or who have recently graduated. Then the state could find professionals with a specific educational profile or specialization which is not available in Latvia (S, F, UK and Denmark).

In the final quote in this series which expresses the rather unproblematic, or perhaps we should better say, unproblematized, version of highly educated emigrants as development agents for their countries or origin, we find a stark argument for the normalcy and desirability of emigration, challenging the notion of “sedentary normativity” by which people who emigrate are seen as somehow “deviant”:

In every developed county there should be a layer of people who want to explore the world and gain the best and what it gives them, and then return with that experience and new thoughts (S, M, UK).

Contrasting these positive imaginaries of Latvian development are some harsher and more complex realities. First, there are barriers related to *ascription* – who you are and how you are perceived and categorized – which apply to both migrants and return migrants in their respective locational contexts of social and organizational emplacement (Williams 2007a: 369–370).

Nagel (2005: 208) emphasizes that ascription can apply to all migrants and not only the lower-skilled to whom it is usually thought to be most relevant. Criteria for ascription are usually built around the migrants’ status as “strangers” or “newcomers”, or their specific (visible) ethnicity and “difference”: the case of “Indian” or “African” doctors in the UK health

sector is commented on by Raghuram and Kofman (2002). For Latvian students and workers, their ascribed characteristics – often implied rather than asked outright – related to their generic “Eastern European-ness” but also to their “unknown” nature as part of a small, little-known, almost “exotic” country. Katrina, aged 28, who has a degree from a prestigious British university and who now works in emerging markets in the financial sector in London, saw her Latvian ethnicity as an asset:

In my work I am never treated as second-class; I receive extra help if I need it... here there are no other Latvians at my level. I am exotic, I feel special. And actually Latvia is a very good topic for small talk, to maintain conversations...

As her own account suggests, Katrina, who came from a wealthy family background in Latvia, saw herself as an exception – one of the very few Latvian high-flyers in the City of London. For most of the others in our research, the main difficulty was dealing with their ascribed identity as Eastern Europeans. This came out less in the academic spaces of higher education, where they often were studying in an international environment, and more in the workplace, especially if the work was casual, low-skilled employment, where the ascription of being a *migrant* was more salient. Consider the case of Laura, a music student who, like many Latvian (and other) students, had to take part-time employment to support herself during her studies. Laura did casual work in bars and cafés and encountered envy and sarcasm from her “local” British workmates:

There are always some girls [at work] who had negative attitudes. “Oh you are studying, and you sing so well, and you also have a child, and you are fit. But who do you think you are, coming from Latvia?”... I just took all this gossip stuff too personally; that’s why I couldn’t stay long in that type of work.

And later in the same interview,

I always had to resist and object to those who took it for granted that Latvia is a backward Eastern European country. I always try to point out that Latvia is actually more a Nordic than an East European country.

The real surprise comes, however, when the highly educated migrants return to Latvia and discover that yet again they are the victims of certain types of ascription. This surprise arises because it is assumed that it will be easier to overcome any prejudice towards returnees because they already possess, as a result of their pre-emigration upbringing and earlier lives in Latvia, at least some of the embedded and encultured knowledge of their home country. Participants become aware of these ascriptive barriers on visits home, or when they start to look for a job, or from the stories of others who have returned and faced difficulties. They discover that time spent abroad, and the possession of “foreign” credentials, are often obstacles rather than assets for getting a decent job in Latvia. The respondent below describes how she anticipated a “penalty” for her foreign experience, and attributed her success therefore to “luck”:

I returned to Latvia, because I found a job in my field: it was pure luck. I would have moved elsewhere if I had found a job [in another country], because in principle, I did

not expect that any employer in Latvia would be interested in giving a job to a Latvian who was studying abroad (S, F, UK, returned to Latvia).

More common was the reaction of other respondents who fear such ascriptive categorization of their 'foreign' experience and time away as a major obstacle preventing their return:

In Latvia it's hard to get a well-paid job if you have been abroad and away from the local job market. Nobody wants to give a job to someone who doesn't have experience in Latvia (S, F, Canada).

Those who studied abroad are usually treated with suspicion, and not fully accepted after his or her return... I think we need to have an expanding horizon about what a person gains when they study abroad (S, F, Netherlands).

The final sentence in the previous quote hints at a prescription for what the home country ought to do to broaden its welcome and appreciation of returning students with their "foreign" (but often very useful and relevant) qualifications. At the same time, there is an awareness that a (foreign) university degree is not a simple passport to a good job or an indicator of the requisite skills. What is needed – as suggested in the quote below – is a kind of "matching" process so that both sides – the returning graduate and the home country – can gain.

Those positive, young people that Latvia needs, aren't just somewhere out there in the universities abroad. A university degree is not an indicator of their skills and experience, which of course, go along with knowledge. If the Latvian government continues with a rigid selection mechanism for a specific area of young people with a specific course of higher education, it will lose a lot of human potential from those who have talents and who have been abroad (S, M, Austria).

In the final quote in this section, another survey respondent, this time a returnee, observes how those who have returned and who, because of their absence abroad, lack local contacts, tend to stick together as a group.

I have observed that young graduates with foreign diplomas, they sometimes socialize together... the knowledge that they share remains within the circle of these people. At a national level – in business and in politics – a local education and experience is often more valued. This is due to the fact that a return migrant, irrespective of the quality of his or her education, lacks local contacts. A person with a foreign diploma is a "suspicious" outsider – you never know how he or she will use his or her knowledge. "Our" people with "our" education are preferred (S, F, Latvia).

To sum up, we find that respondents and interviewees are aware of the ascriptive criteria that are assigned to them, both abroad and at home. Some see these ascriptions largely in positive terms. Students and graduates with foreign qualifications and experiences are imagined as boundary spanners and as a resource as a result of their embrained knowledge. However, negativity also features strongly in some participants' responses and

narratives, expressing pessimism over the possibilities of knowledge transfer due to various obstacles and boundaries. The most important of these boundaries is the economic one.

Return, knowledge transfer, and economic boundaries

According to Williams' (2007a) framework, return migrants already possess some and encultured knowledge about their home country, and this should make it easier for them to transfer knowledge gained during their studies and work experience abroad. And indeed, the question of return, either actual or possible, featured prominently in our respondents' written and oral reflections. Virtually all of these paid homage to the general neoliberal economic discourse which is now hegemonic in Latvia, as it is in the other post-socialist countries of the EU. Return is associated with terminologies of progress which, it is claimed, will change the "rusty" thinking in Latvia with its heritage of Soviet-era relationships and ways of doing things. Particular attention in the questionnaire answers and interview narratives is given to the introduction of new social norms and modern "Western" standards in education, public administration and business, with the returnees casting themselves in the role of key agents of change. The following quote exemplifies the idealistic, almost revolutionary, youthful stance of a recent returnee railing against the deadening influence of the "embrained USSR" on older people's minds and attitudes:

[I returned] to develop this country. Who else, if not young people? Older people have the USSR in their minds and these blocking mentalities don't allow them to develop progressive thinking on things which have been developed long ago in Europe and other places of the world (S, F, Latvia, returned from UK).

This quote is interesting in that it draws a triple boundary: a geographical one between "Europe" (meaning Western Europe) and Latvia, still afflicted by the heritage of its membership of the USSR; a generational one between "youth" and "older people", the former progressive and "European", the latter the repository of Soviet-style mentalities; and a historical one between the socialist era, when Latvia was part of the Soviet Union, and the post-socialist era of democratization, independence and market-led economics. Let us explore these multiple boundaries further with the help of our informants and some references to key literature.

As Stenning et al. (2010: 2) point out, the "transition" from communism to capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe "represents perhaps one of the boldest experiments with neo-liberal ideas in the world today, demonstrating vividly the policies and practices associated with this market-led ideology". The neoliberal project, for these countries as for others, "rests on a theory of political economy which promotes markets, enterprise and private property, restructures regulation into more limited forms, and reduces the role of the public sector and welfare" (2010: 2). Finally, neoliberalization is a social project too – predicated on rejection of the "communist" society and on the promotion of the individual, especially as an *enterprising* individual. Once again, in the words of Stenning et al. (2010: 227), "the project of neo-liberalism rests on the cultivation of neo-liberal subjectivities which seek to promote an individualizing ethics of autonomous self-improvement and to erode communal and social relationships".

At first blush, both the Latvian state and its economic planners on the one side, and the young graduates with experience of emigration on the other, subscribe to this neoliberal

imaginary. The young people, in any case, have lived most, even all in some cases, of their lives in the post-socialist period and have little or no direct memory of the Soviet era. Certainly we have multiple instances of our respondents aspiring to contribute their accumulated knowledge, expertise and initiative for the market-economy style of development in Latvia. Two examples follow below. Note that these are male voices, like most of the respondents who echo this neoliberal economic theme.

At this moment I am in London because this is the center of the world in many senses... But I will return soon. I am sure about my commitment to invest in Latvia. I am convinced that I can help Latvian society to become more organized and I have my ideas about how to do that. I hope there will be more people like me who are ready to invest their knowledge in Latvia (S, M, UK).

I work in a new enterprise in Riga. I use my knowledge here in a very direct way. Honestly, I believe that my [specific] knowledge and training was the only reason why I was asked to join this specific team. The company I am working for is developing technological solutions for education and my diploma is specifically in information technologies for education (S, M, Latvia, returned from Sweden).

Here, then, and especially in the latter quote, we have a good example of the “matching” exercise referred to earlier, where distinctive embrained and embodied knowledge (i.e. both theoretical and practical) is transferred as an innovation – on this occasion from nearby Sweden.

But other respondents were more explicit in drawing a distinction between the public sector, where some of the old Soviet-era work cultures – and personnel – survive, and the private sector which is on the one hand seen as more “open” but on the other still beset by too many regulatory constraints. The next two quotes illustrate this.

I am very skeptical about working for the public sector. This is what I am currently doing after my return to Latvia, but I certainly do not intend to stay here. Maybe [I’ll get a job] in the private sector, in fields such as information technology – this [referring to the work culture] is different (S, F, Latvia, returned from UK).

There are no attractive regulations for businesses, particularly for small businesses in Latvia. One can dream about investments from the young and talented, but the reality is that there is a small market, inefficient bureaucracy, and lack of support and incentives from the state if a person wants to launch a business (S, F, Latvia, returned from Germany).

Particularly in the second quote above, there is explicit reference to another aspect of the economic boundary between Latvia and the stronger and larger “Western” economies – that of the small size of the market in Latvia. Not just the market for products, but also the opportunities for profitable investment and for specialized jobs. This is part of the syndrome of economic and geographic peripherality in Europe. From the three Baltic states round to Ireland, Portugal and Greece, all small countries on the “edge” of Europe, the small size of their economies leads to restrictive opportunities for internationally educated returnees. In a study on the emigration of Irish graduates, King and Shuttleworth

(1995) wrote about the “truncated” nature of the Irish labor market, especially for specialized graduates, who simply could not find jobs in their field. Academia is a good example of this truncation of opportunities. There are very few openings available in universities and higher-level research institutions in small, peripheral countries; and those that there are often get taken by “insider” candidates who have stayed close to their “patrons” and networks of power and decision-making. The following quote sums up this situation: the informant would like to return to Latvia, but there is an extreme paucity of work opportunities for the very highly educated – those with a PhD.

I will finish my PhD and then a postdoc, but then I will look for a job abroad. In Latvia it is virtually impossible to get academic positions from outside. There is a lack of job opportunities. Besides, universities in Latvia have their own insider trading and do not want to change this system. But I would love to live and work in Latvia... (S, M, USA).

In sum, the economic boundary between Latvia and the major economies of the EU – to which its young, aspiring migrants have migrated for study and work purposes – remains indelible, at least for the time being. Certain basic facts of geography – the country’s location and small size – cannot be changed, and these are elements which are shared with its Baltic neighbors, Estonia to the north and Lithuania to the south. Although this is not a comparative paper, it is worth noting briefly the similarities in migration dynamics between the “Baltic triplets” and the common fears of a problematic demographic future: an aging, shrinking total population due to the mutually reinforcing factors of large-scale emigration of the young and a low and declining birth rate, and the risks of “brain drain” (Lulle 2013).

Social, cultural and ethnic boundaries: recruitment and power relations

Alongside the more objective and measurable economic boundary lie other boundaries of a more intangible nature; these are social, cultural, and ethnic. These have to be traversed both on migration and return, but are especially challenging for the first-time migrant. Many respondents and interviewees remarked on one or more of three “markers” of their distinctive ascribed identities when they moved abroad: their names, their accents, and their “looks”. While names and accents, as immediate signifiers of being a foreigner, were mentioned by both young men and women, “looks” were a particular concern for women, who said that they could easily “spot” a Latvian or Eastern European woman at university or at work. Recognizable features – in the eyes of some of the interviewees who discussed this issue – included attention to hair and make-up, bodily poses and deportment, and smart and stylish clothes but with a tendency to “bling”. After some time living abroad, these markers can fade, as Alina relates below:

After living abroad I have changed my views significantly. I think that a beautiful person can be beautiful from within, not from outfits. I know that in many Eastern European countries people are judged from how they look, and they pay a lot of attention to their appearance when they go to university or to the office... choosing sexy outfits... I dress casually now... and my accent has faded away (I, F, Ireland and UK).

Alina's quote hints at the mechanism of social remittances (Levitt 1998) which occurs when these changed attitudes are conveyed to those whom Gawlewicz (2015) classifies as "significant others" (relatives, close friends etc.) in the home society. Here, in the country of origin (in our case Latvia, in the study of Gawlewicz, Poland), there are entrenched attitudes towards "visible" minorities, gender issues (notably the objectification and discrimination of women), gay people etc., which can be contested by the broader experience of returning migrants. Latvia is a very "white" country. As a result, most informants spoke about their experiences of diversity abroad very positively; and that they could not imagine anything like this in Latvia. Laura, whom we already quoted, described how, as a result of studying and working in the UK, "I had to learn about issues I was not interested in before, such as how Latvia treats its minorities, or about politics in Latvia". Liene, who had studied at a British university and was now, at the time of the interview, working for an advertising firm in London, described visiting Latvia with her British boyfriend, whose father is from the Middle East: "for elderly aunties in Riga, this was like the end of the world" (to have a boyfriend of a "different" ethnicity). And Maija, who had come to London ten years earlier to study music, was even more outspoken about racism and the narrow mentality in Latvia:

I really like the "London mentality". Here people are just so open-minded... I just cannot stand that narrow-mindedness in Latvia... everything is so small in those heads, when I talk to people there... I really loathe racism, this is one of the main things I dislike about Latvia. I am a jazz musician... half my friends are black.

In their revisiting of the concept of social remittances, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) acknowledged that the flow of social remittances is not merely developed one-way (from the "developed" host country to the "less-developed" country of migrants' origin), but multi-directional and circular, following the trajectories of the migrants. Hence migrants take with them embrained knowledge and embodied expertise which can be of use to the host society, even if some of these qualities may be exaggerated by their "ascribed" nature. For Polish migrants in the UK, Gawlewicz (2015) shows how they are constructed as "experts" who carry a distinctive knowledge and aptitude regarding certain types of specialized labor, as well as being ascribed the general label of "hard worker".

Several of our respondents mentioned that, when they entered the education system abroad, they found that they had a higher level of mathematical skills than the local students. This can be regarded as a distinctive field of embrained knowledge for a migrating student aiming at high achievement, and perhaps can compensate, at least initially, for their lack of fluency in the local language of instruction. In the case of Gunta, who had gone to study in Ireland, her mathematical knowledge was brokered in exchange for help in writing her essays:

I think that the math was much better taught in Latvia. Many of my course-mates at university asked me to help with statistics and calculations, but they helped me with essays in English. Often, with my essays, I thought I wrote it fine, but a native-speaker would rack their brain and then say "Wait a minute... alright, I think I understand what you mean". And then he or she rewrites my sentences completely!

Since a successful return to Latvia is mainly related to employability, the ability of the educated returnee to navigate the home country's recruitment practices is crucial for knowledge transfer and career development. Two theoretical frames are mobilized in this discussion. The first is Levitt's (1998) notion of *systems of practice* – for instance, how local organizations function in terms of how they evaluate foreign-acquired qualifications and the weight that hirers may put on personal contacts and local knowledge. As Waters (2006) has shown for Hong Kong, students who study abroad do so not only to acquire degrees from internationally accredited, even “world-class” universities, which enhance their job prospects back home or elsewhere in the global graduate labor market; they are also encouraged, and financed, to do so by their middle-class parents in order to preserve and increase the families' social status through the accumulation of valuable “family cultural capital” via a “Western” degree qualification.

The second theoretical notion is the *phronetic approach* discussed by Hargreaves (2012), wherein attention is devoted to “the operation and interplay of value and power in specific settings” (2012: 322) – in other words, an understanding of, and a willingness to accept or work within, the constraints set by local ways of doing things. This is highly relevant to the Latvian case where the socially situated, encultured knowledge of “how things are done” in Latvia is a challenging obstacle for those who have studied abroad and aspire to return. Returning graduates seeking jobs have to contend with entrenched power relations and so risk losing out to those with local knowledge and personal connections.

Here follow three informant voices which express different forms of reaction to these socio-cultural barriers: the first is almost a cry of exasperation; the second articulates a desire to change things in the unreformed public sector; and the third reflects a different view, which is that of those who have returned and who feel so fundamentally changed by their experience abroad that they end up by sticking together with those of similar migratory background.

My disappointment whilst working in Latvia was too big for me to want to return. Especially because of people's attitude. I could return to Latvia again, but only to start my own business, not to work for others (S, F, Germany, returned to Latvia but then moved abroad again).

I want to change the work culture in the state sector. In many offices the systems are outdated, inefficient and corrupt. I understand that perhaps I am a bit naïve but I really hope that those of us who have been abroad could start changing this system bit by bit. Frankly... this is the only motive for me to stay in Latvia and not to emigrate again (S, F, Latvia, returned from Sweden).

To return is quite complicated. When I visit Riga from time to time, I feel that I think and see things differently from those who have been living in Latvia all their lives. I have changed and I feel I no longer fit into this society. I guess if I return for good one day, I may find a common language only with others who have lived and obtained their education abroad (S, F, Canada).

Within Latvia, the most important and sensitive cultural boundary is the one between “true” Latvians and the largest ethno-linguistic minority group, the Russians, who make up nearly a third of the population. Russophones who have emigrated face additional

barriers when they contemplate return, since this group, formerly well-placed during the Soviet era, now sees itself as disadvantaged in the more nationalistic post-Soviet years. Even if, in most cases, such highly educated Russian-speakers do not identify strongly with Russia but see themselves as a “particular kind of Latvian” (Cheskin 2013), they still face ascribed identity markers as “Russians”.

I want to highlight that I come from a Russian-speaking family. Despite the fact that I studied in a Latvian[-speaking] school and lived in a Latvian environment, I have never been “one of us” [literally “an our person”]. I must admit that I really doubt whether Latvia wants me back, whatever qualifications I might have obtained. I do not comply with the [Latvian] norm, and I simply do not fit into the [standardized Latvian] environment (S, F, UK).

Faced with the combination of economic, social and cultural barriers between Latvia and abroad, especially in the context of return, many of our informants saw a possible solution in living transnationally, as “border spanners”. The main salary-earning country would be elsewhere, ideally in Europe with good and cheap transportation connections to Latvia, allowing frequent visits and back-and-forth travel. One common idea was to combine the security of work and study abroad with the launching of small-scale projects in Latvia. A good example of this approach was revealed in the interview with Martins, who did his bachelor degree in Canada and is now gathering work experience in both Latvia and Canada with a view to doing a more specialized Master’s degree somewhere else and then perhaps eventually resettling in Latvia. Here is an extended extract from his interview:

I want to return to Latvia; that is my ultimate goal. But, in order to reach it, I have to invest in myself as much as I can, while I am studying and working abroad. I must climb up as high as I can, and this is the reason I did not return to Latvia immediately after my undergraduate studies. I have my degree but the university I was studying at was not amongst the world’s best in architecture, my field of study. Therefore, I decided to obtain some work experience and build my specific portfolio as a combination of my undergraduate diploma and some experience of creative work. Then I will apply to a really distinguished university, ideally in the US, but I also consider Switzerland and the Netherlands, for my Master studies. Getting a job is more difficult than I thought. Now, when I have some experience, including a project I did in Latvia, my chances to get into a great university are better. Already during my undergraduate studies I carried out a project related to Latvia. I made a renovation project for a small farm in the countryside; how to restore an old stable block into a guesthouse for tourists. I spent all of my free time researching this project [...]. I do like all the things I can get in North America and Western Europe. Then I meet people like me, when I am visiting Latvia during the summer, and I think – what if all of them would return back to Latvia? Could we not make Latvia a much better place? (I, M, Canada, visiting Latvia).

Martins’ life-plan reflects a careful assessment of his chances both to further his own career prospects and to set out his vision for Latvia’s future – an optimistic future for the country based on return migration, although the questions at the end of his quote are posed rhetorically as if they might never happen. In a way, his example encapsulates all the

knowledge types outlined earlier, and hence is a good choice to conclude the paper's empirical evidence. His studies in architecture involve both theory and practice, hence both *embrained* and *embodied* knowledge; whilst his assessment of his own life trajectory – in Canada, Latvia, and possibly in the United States or elsewhere in the future – and his “hands-on” work on rural tourism development, illustrate the flexible phronetic resources that he has been building up.

Conclusion

Taking the case of Latvia, this article has moved “beyond remittances”, conceived as simple financial flows, to explore an aspect of *social* remittances, namely knowledge transfer. We have probed how highly educated students and graduates think of themselves as potential agents of development and change for their home country. Following Williams (2007a), we drew a distinction between *embrained* knowledge (the main type generated by study abroad) and *embodied* knowledge (mainly accrued by those with foreign work experience). We posed two main questions. How do young, highly educated Latvian migrants imagine, and engage in, knowledge transfer and development activities across international borders? And how do they see their own contribution in terms of their country's needs and opportunities? The evidence base to respond to these questions came from a two-pronged research design: an online survey of foreign-educated Latvian graduates, and semi-structured interviews with a sample of the same target population.

Both the Latvian state, through its Return Migration Support Plan, and many of our informants in their questionnaire and interview statements, apparently see great potential for Latvia's student and graduate diaspora to contribute to the modernization and development of the country, both in the public but more particularly in the business sector. Concrete results, however, fall some way short of this rhetoric. The lofty ambitions of the Plan – that half of all emigrants would return, and that especially the highly educated would return – have had to be revised downwards to more modest outcomes, including a small-scale internship scheme. The emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative and collaboration is consistent both with the neoliberal vision of the country's economic future, and with the international policy literature on “mobilizing the diaspora” for development (see for instance Brinkerhoff 2009; de Haas 2006; Newland and Tanaka 2010). But this strategy needs to be confronted with two important caveats. The first is the questionable morality of making migrants somehow “responsible” for developing their home country (Gamlen 2014: 589). The second is that this attempt by the government to encourage a sense of patriotic duty is out of touch with the reality of Latvian emigrants' minimal trust in the government.

The empirical data from questionnaire responses and interview narratives likewise articulated a variety of perspectives, oscillating between optimistic scenarios built around the participants' self-declared contribution to Latvia's development, and a more negative, even cynical interpretation which stressed the barriers which would need to be overcome. These barriers – economic, political, social and cultural – were both “real” and psychological. Kuus (2004) has written of the “broadly orientalist discourse” that assumes and reifies essentialized differences between Europe (meaning “Western Europe” or the “Old EU” of before 2004) and Eastern Europe, the latter being portrayed as still rather backward and not yet “fully European”. We also see these discourses of alterity embedded in the interview narratives of several of our participants, which poses further challenges of interpretation. Do these remarks by the interviewees represent a sharp and insightful

critique of the “systems of practice” in their home country; or do they reflect an internalization of the wider “othering” of Eastern Europe and hence risk the reproduction of stereotypes? For sure, there are elements of both, even within the same participants who are ambivalent about their potential to return and effect real change. They are proud of being Latvian, but also highly critical of the way the country still struggles to free itself from its post-Soviet identity and ways of doing things.

To sum up: the notion that foreign-educated graduates can be an exogenous force for Latvian development is tempered by the persistence of structural forces and mentalities deriving from the Soviet era, which serve to stifle certain types of independent initiative, especially in the public sector. In other sectors, more dependent on markets, or in the academic sector, small scale and “insider trading” made it difficult for graduates and student emigrants to envisage a productive return. In our analysis, this problem was conceptualized in several ways: by realizing the extent to which certain types of knowledge were embedded within the social, linguistic and cultural norms of the country or system in which they were produced; by looking at the ways that some migrants, especially returnees, had played the role of boundary spanners and brokers between different encultured systems; and by appreciating therefore the strategic role played by context-specific and flexible phronetic knowledge.

We feel that the Latvian case is by no means unique. Emigration trends are rather similar across other countries in the A8 group, particularly neighboring Estonia, Lithuania and Poland. And the questions we posed to frame our analysis are surely relevant across a much wider spectrum of countries globally that have “exported” significant shares of their student and graduate young people to study and work abroad.

¹ Ministry of Economics, press release 12 July 2012. Available: <http://m.lvportals.lv/visi/preses-relizes?id=250048>

² Baltic News Agency, 29 August 2013.

³ Speech of the President of the State addressing delegates of the World Latvians Economics and Innovation Forum, 10 July 2015. Available: http://www.president.lv/pk/content/?Art_id=23283

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